

Message Text

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ACTION OES-09

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FOR OES/NET
DEPT. PASS TO FDA
DOE FOR DR. JAMES LIVERMAN

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: TBIO, JA
SUBJECT: ILLICIT FOOD IRRADIATION BUSINESS UNCOVERED IN
JAPAN

1. WHAT MUST BE CONSIDERED A RATHER BIZARRE UNDERTAKING HAS BEEN UNCOVERED IN JAPAN. A FOOD PROCESSING COMPANY WHICH SOLD DRIED POWDERED VEGETABLES TO JAPAN'S LARGEST BABY FOOD MANUFACTURER AND DISTRIBUTOR, AS WELL AS TO OTHER SMALLER COMPANIES, HAS BEEN FOUND TO HAVE BEEN EMPLOYING COBALT-60 GAMMA RADIATION TO STERILIZE THE VEGETABLE POWDER BECAUSE CONVENTIONAL PROCESSES COULD NOT MEET RIGID STANDARDS SET BY BUYERS FOR BACTERIAL CONTENT. GAMMA IRRADIATION FOR THE PRESERVATION OF FOODS IS ILLEGAL IN JAPAN EXCEPT FOR INHIBITION OF SPROUTING IN POTATOES.

2. THE COMPANY IN QUESTION WAS ABLE TO OBTAIN IRRADIATION
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SERVICES FROM ANOTHER ORGANIZATION WITH A COBALT-60 FACILITY BY LABELING THE CANS OF VEGETABLE POWDER AS ANIMAL FEED. THE POWDER WAS SOLD AT RETAIL IN 48-GRAM BAGS FOR YEN 250 (ABOUT \$1.30), AND WAS ALSO INCORPORATED INTO OTHER FOOD PRODUCTS SUCH AS SOUPS. VEGETABLES INVOLVED WERE PRIMARILY CABBAGES AND CHINESE CABBAGES. SOMEWHERE BETWEEN 50 AND 75 TONS OF DRIED VEGETABLES

HAD BEEN PROCESSED IN THIS MANNER DURING PAST FOUR YEARS (NEWSPAPER REPORTS GIVE CONFLICTING DATA). THE MANUFACTURING PLANT HAS BEEN CLOSED BY PREFECTURAL AUTHORITIES AND DISTRIBUTERS HAVE BEEN ORDERED TO RECALL FOODS CONTAINING THE IRRADIATED POWDER. SEVERAL HUNDRED THOUSAND CASES OF FOOD ARE INVOLVED.

3. PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION AT THE PREFECTURAL LEVEL INDICATED THAT THE VEGETABLE POWDER HAD BEEN IRRADIATED AT AN AVERAGE DOSE OF 500 KILORADS--"33 TIMES THE AMOUNT NORMALLY APPLIED TO POTATOES TO PREVENT SPROUTING". THE AUTHORITIES "WERE UNABLE TO DETECT THE PRESENCE OF RADIATION IN SAMPLES OF THE POWDERED VEGETABLES".

4. EDITORIAL COMMENTARY HAS BEEN HEAVY, HIGHLY NEGATIVE AND SOMETIMES ILL-INFORMED. FEARS HAVE BEEN EXPRESSED BY ONE PAPER, FOR EXAMPLE, ABOUT HARMFUL EFFECTS FROM RESIDUAL RADIOACTIVITY, WITH REFERENCE MADE TO STATEMENTS BY DR. ERNEST STERNGLASS THAT ARTIFICIAL RADIATION HAS KILLED OVER 400,000 CHILDREN IN U.S.

5. EMBASSY SCICOUNS (WHO WAS IN CHARGE OF U.S. FOOD IRRADIATION PROGRAM FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS) DISCUSSED CURRENT SITUATION WITH HEAD OF JAPANESE FOOD IRRADIATION PROGRAM AT TAKASAKI RESEARCH ESTABLISHMENT. LATTER WAS OF OPINION THAT ALTHOUGH INCIDENT WOULD NOT CAUSE

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IMMEDIATE HARM TO PROGRAM, IT WOULD PROVIDE FUEL TO CONSUMER ORGANIZATIONS WHO HAVE OPPOSED SALE OF IRRADIATED FOODS IN JAPAN. HE SAID THAT DRIED VEGETABLES IRRADIATED AT 500 KRAD WOULD SHOW NO DETECTABLE CHANGE IN QUALITY OR WHOLESOMENESS AND OF COURSE THERE WOULD BE NO RESIDUAL RADIOACTIVITY. WITH POTATOES IRRADIATED AT LOW DOSES ALREADY APPROVED FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION, RESEARCH HAS BEEN COMPLETED ON RADIATION PRESERVATION OF ONIONS, RICE, WHEAT, FISH PASTE, AND SAUSAGE, AND THESE FOODS ARE NOW BEING EVALUATED FOR WHOLESOMENESS BY NATIONAL HYGIENIC LABORATORY OF MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND WELFARE. IRRADIATION OF MANDARIN ORANGES (MIKAN) IS STILL IN RESEARCH STAGE. CONSIDERING JAPANESE SENSITIVITIES ABOUT ANYTHING NUCLEAR AND GENERAL LACK OF PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF FOOD IRRADIATION PROCESSES, IT APPEARS CERTAIN THAT BAD PUBLICITY FROM THE BABY FOOD INCIDENT WILL HURT THE JAPANESE PROGRAM CONSIDERABLY. MANSFIELD

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